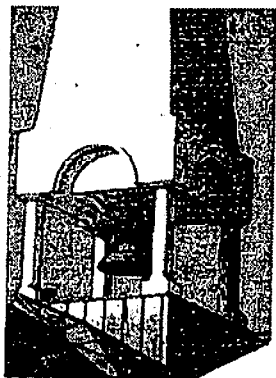


The Bells of Duxbury: An Un-Tolled Story

By R. ELLIOTT ANDERSON

Standing on the balcony of the Mirador Hotel on a Sunday morning on a hillside above Vevy, Switzerland, ringing church bells in the town below, nestled on the shore of Lake Geneva, rise up to greet you. But it isn't necessary to be in Vevy to hear church bells and bell towers and town hall copulas ringing. Just try any town in Europe and no matter how sophisticated the shops, the slick cars and the ubiquitous cell phones; the bells from centuries past still toll to be heard on every narrow village street and elegant boulevard, everyday. That's part of the aura of Europe. But the everyday sound of multiple bells ringing simultaneously across village and town never was transposed to the new world. Wonder why?



Holy Family Steeple

The Village area of Duxbury has a number of bells, but they do not toll simultaneously pervading the town center, not even at Christmas time. Meaning: the European sensation of a chorus of bells is not part of the scene here. Nonetheless, there are some colorful bells in the Village churches. And they ring everyday, believe it or not, even if not together. They are an un-tolled story, so to speak, so stick with me on this.

One of the more intriguing bell stories surround the church built in 1823, now occupied by the congregation of St. John The Evangelist on Washington St. The church

was erected on a slice of farm land donated by Seth Sprague and was originally a Methodist Church. The story goes that Seth was an honored member of the church for 20 years, but became so upset with the Methodist Episcopal support of slavery that he withdrew from the congregation. Then nailed his pew door shut, locked the church door, and put up land and money to build a new church, more to his liking, on another piece of his farm, right next door. This was in 1842, about 20 years before the Civil War and Seth was over 80 years old. A true abolitionist, and by the way, a father of 11 daughters and four sons, all by the same wife. His chagrin resulted in today's Pilgrim Church building, largely financed by him in 1844.

Seth's former church dwindled and eventually was left

empty for more than 30 years, until 1873 when British transatlantic cable workers housed in Duxbury began to hold Episcopal services in the long abandoned church. Ironically, one of Seth's granddaughters, a devout Episcopalian, bought the church building for \$25.

But the plot thickens. St. John The Evangelist, a white New England church tucked away along Washington St., with a lovely facade, a picturesque steeple atop an appealing belfry has no bell in the belfry. That's right. Sans bell. And church history is silent on the matter of bells. Never has been one, according to Becky Nightingale, the church administrator. "We listen to the bells at the Pilgrim Church," she says. Did Seth take the bell with him? Not likely. Definitely an un-tolled story here.

The Pilgrim Church has a bell, a carillon and a clock. The original bell was replaced in 1896, making the present one 102 years old. "It hangs in a cradle, the cradle has been boxed-in to keep it steady and help support it," says Pat Wiedner, Pilgrim Church's administrative assistant. Therefore, the bell does not swing in order to toll; a hammer driven by an electric motor strikes the outside of the old bell to produce a ringing sound. A rope is still attached to the bell, but it is unused.

Did you know Duxbury has an official Town Clock? Well, it has. And that clock is in the town of the Pilgrim Church, and the Church bell strikes the hour 24 hours a day. The Clock was given to the town by the Ellison family in 1905. For the first 50 years it was wound by hand, a duty carried out by the town "Keeper of the Clock," a position that remains to this day. The Pilgrim Church sexton, Anthony Nightingale, is the current "Keeper of the Clock" and maintains the huge town timepiece to keep us all on schedule. Speaking of town duties with an historic twist, there is still a "Fence Viewer," a "Wharfinger," and a "Weigher of Coal, Hay and Grain." (No kidding.)

"Church neighbors are quick to tell us when the clock's not striking on time," says Pat Wiedner, "even though it

strikes 24 hours a day we've never had a complaint, but we get comments when it's not set right. Power outages are the biggest problem."

To get to the heart of the matter, inside the Pilgrim Church, an unusual (and heavy) gray ladder lays next to a wall on the balcony. The ladder is needed to enter a hatch in the church ceiling. Once above the ceiling, the age of the structure is obvious, mixing with pink insulation. The Town Clock mechanism sits on a raised wooden platform among the rafters, another step ladder length up from the hatch opening. A long pendulum, like a huge grandfather's clock, hangs down from the mechanism tick-tocking away, actuating iron cogwheels. Still another wooden ladder, like a painter had left it behind, extends up from the suspended platform to the bell tower itself. (Take a look sometime.)

But the old bell is not the only source of community sound. A carillon was installed in the church in 1976, dedicated to the Rev. Stephen War Turrell, the church's pastor for 20 years. For the uninitiated, a carillon is a set of bells capable of ringing out melodies, such as hymns. The Pilgrim carillon is electronic and consists of bells recorded on audio tape, amplified through a set of loudspeakers that are visible from outside up in the belfry. About 50 hymns of a minute or so each are available on tape. If you want to get a little sense of European charm, the carillon bells are played five minutes after noon-time and five minutes after 5 pm. It is also activated on special occasions, such as the Fourth of July when a tape of patriotic hymns ring-out for about 15 minutes.

The bell in the First Parish Church was caste in 1819 by an apprentice of Paul Revere. And guess what? It can be pulled with a rope. All 1600 pounds swings on a wooden wheel six feet in diameter, striking a clapper 36 inches long with a 5 1/4-inch ball at the end. Standing next to it when it rings is a riveting experiencing.

From time to time bell pulling parties of youthful parishioners are sent aloft to announce the 10:30 am

Sunday service, by yanking the rope which extends down into the attic of the church. Once it gets rolling, the bell rope is perfectly capable of lifting a youthful puller off the floor on the up swing. Occasionally, the bell pirouettes over the top in a 360, which confuses the bell rope considerably and ends the party. A favorite time for ringing the bell by hand is New Year's Eve. How's that for ringing in the new?

Like Pilgrim Church, the First Parish bell rings the time, but it is a different sort of time -- ship's time. An electronically activated hammer strikes the outside of the bell every half hour sounding nautical bells, reminding all of Duxbury's ship building and seafaring heritage. But the ship's bells do not chime after midnight.

In the early 1980s the First Parish bell was restored. Says Joe Shea, who supervised the restoration, "The clapper was taken to Sturbridge Village, where the blacksmith heated it up cherry red and beat it back into shape. The contact point on the ball has to be very small or the bell loses tone." The National Park Service helped by stripping the bell clean and applying black shoe polish to buff and preserve it. The bell may ring nautically, but it is rough as a cob, not a shiny brass ship's bell.

When the bell was replaced in the tower after refurbishing, a stainless steel alloy created especially for restoration of the Statue of Liberty was acquired to secure the bell in place. So there is a little bit of Liberty in the bell.

When the Old Corner Stone Baptist Church on Massachusetts Ave. in North Cambridge burned down, the church's bell, cast in 1855, understandably, survived. It ended up in the Cambridge Public Works Yard, where it remained for a long time. What to do with

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it? Finally, a call was placed to the Catholic Archdiocese, to find if there was any interest in the bell. There was. In Duxbury. The Holy Family Church was under construction and could make good use of the bell. So, according to Rev. Monsignor William F. Glenn, the bell was first shipped to Cincinnati, Ohio where it was cleaned up (black shoe polish?) and electrified so it could be struck automatically with a hammer. Thence to Duxbury. But before it was finally hoisted to the church's tower, the rejuvenated bell was placed on a float and appropriately displayed in the fourth of July parade in 1987.

Now some details. The Holy Family Church bell does not strike the hour, but rings for close to a minute, ten minutes before each Mass: Saturday at 10 am and 6 pm, and on Sunday at 8:30, 10 and 11:30 am. It also sounds one gong at 8:15 am daily.

There is more. In memory of the Annunciation, the Angelus bell is tolled about a minute at noon and again at 6 pm. Although the Angelus proper is offered three times a day, out of courtesy to its neighbors, the Church does not ring the morning Angelus at 6 am. Like other Village churches, the bell also tolls for special occasions.

To change the subject a little. Interestingly, the steeple on the Pilgrim Church, which looks like it has been there from day one, was only added in 1962. Well, the Holy Family steeple was subtracted in January 1996, when high winds fetched it off the church bellry. And what a nervous January night it was for Holy Family Church, fearing that the church bell, trembling in its

mooring (it could be felt in the church) would break loose crashing its massive weight through the roof, easily through the church floor, and down to the Parish Center on the lower level. Fortunately, it didn't. And the weight of the bell probably kept the church tower in place, a ballast against the ferocious wind.

When asked about the surround sound of the church bells of Europe, Holy Family's Father Joe Moyer commented: "They add to the community dimension, and the ringing helps draw the community together."

That's it. That's the sensation on the hillside above Vevey. The bells express a sense of community, the sounds are an announcement, whether it be Gabriel bringing the good news; the spirit of the sea; the horn from the town clock. Bells link European townspeople together as they ring a unified message through cramped streets and across town squares.

As the better shelter of a building, bedroon only mentality envelopes on a former seafaring village, one that still has ship's bell pealing forth from the First Parish Church, might the sounds of Village bells call out a reminder, not just of Christmas spirit, but that all within hearing are in this thing together and a sense of community is still alive and well along side Duxbury Bay? Even if there is no longer a gathering of all at the Meeting House.

